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The Model Suburb

The Savage Crescent State Housing Precinct, Palmerston North

A research exercise presented in partial fulfilment of the requirement for
the Bachelor of Arts with Honours in History at Massey University

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Introduction

A significant aspect of the policy of the First Labour Government of New Zealand upon coming to power in 1935 was housing. Housing was always an issue for governments and political parties during the early half of the Twentieth Century in New Zealand, but it was only after the Depression of the 1930s that it was brought to the fore. In fact, the history of government housing schemes in New Zealand dates back to the mid-1890s, when health reformers argued that slum dwellings would become a feature of towns and cities in the country unless more adequate housing was built to replace them. In 1900, they successfully pressed for inclusion of municipal housing schemes in the Municipal Corporations Act of that year, which permitted local bodies to both buy land and construct workers dwellings on it, and to buy existing houses for workers.¹ The act would become the basis of the ideals that shaped the planning, construction and promotion of government housing schemes in years to come.

To solve the problem of slums in New Zealand towns, the Municipal Corporations Act embodied the creation of model workers dwellings within the towns.² To create them, controls on dwellings, dwelling space, road width and the position local authorities to control the construction of houses and the amount of people that lived in them were passed in the Act. The act enabled 'city beautifiers' to create an urban aesthetic of parks and open spaces in town centres that would be appreciated by people living in suburbs, while forming in statute the regulation of housing conditions

¹ Gael Ferguson, *Building the New Zealand Dream*, Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1994, p. 51.

² Ferguson, p. 51.

and suburban land settlement schemes.³ A precedent was set for future housing in New Zealand.

In the following years more efforts were made to carry out improvements to housing in New Zealand. Health was not the only issue behind these efforts. For example, in 1905 the Liberal Government, upon hearing of poor opportunities for waged workers to own homes, passed the Advances to Workers Act and built several small state-housing areas.⁴ At the same time, State housing schemes were seen as a way ^{to} of enabling immigrants to settle into New Zealand. W.F. Massey, who became Prime Minister in 1912, saw government-assisted housing schemes as being both a new encouragement to immigration and an antidote to the new and subversive ideologies of the political left.⁵ In the following years, new ideas of life at home and technologies began to take shape. During and after international tensions flared, successive governments became concerned that housing in the country had to be suitable for the well-being of children who represented New Zealand's future, while the arrival of electricity in the 1920s saw houses become a wider area for work and leisure activities, with developments such as hot water and the wireless appearing in many homes. ⁶

There were renewed attempts by many organisations to press for improvements to housing in New Zealand and abolish slum dwellings once and for all. The First World War and the 1918 Influenza Epidemic fuelled concerns that health and the moral

³ Ferguson, p. 57.

⁴ Penny Isaac and Erik Olssen. 'The Justification for Labour's Housing Scheme: The Discourse of 'the Slum' in *At Home in New Zealand: History Houses People*, ed. Barbara Brookes, Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2000, p. 107.

⁵ Isaac and Olssen, p. 108.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 108.

wellbeing of New Zealand would suffer from poor housing and slum areas. Dirt, disease and exploitation were believed to be the constant companions of slum-dwellers, and concerns were raised over substandard living conditions such as overcrowding and inadequate ventilation in poorer housing areas.⁷

These concerns over housing, especially in working-class suburbs, prompted government authorities to examine the housing situation more closely than before. One such response was the 'First New Zealand Town-Planning Conference and Exhibition', staged in Wellington between 20 and 23 May 1919. One approach to the housing problem discussed in the conference was the garden city concept. Samuel Hurst Seager, an early advocate of garden cities and town planning in New Zealand, had originally suggested this design in 1900.⁸ This was based on an article in Sir Ebenezer Howard's 1898 publication *Tomorrow - A Peaceful Path To Real Reform*, where an idea to stop adding to the overcrowded cities of the time by establishing self-sufficient satellite towns in green belts was put forward.⁹ It was hoped that the towns would create a total change in the lifestyles of the people that moved into them from the cities. Their inhabitants would experience a pleasant environment that would improve their quality of life and ultimately make them better human beings with more worthy aspirations.¹⁰ An integral part of the garden city concept was a curved street with room for trees.¹¹

⁷ Ferguson, p. 73.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 75.

⁹ Dorothy Pilkington, *Savage Crescent Walk* (Pamphlet), New Zealand Historic Places Trust (Manawatu Branch), 1994, p. 5.

¹⁰ Pilkington, p. 5.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 5.

This renewed government interest in the state of dwellings in poorer areas of New Zealand brought changes to housing construction legislation. The year 1919 also saw the Housing Act being passed. This new act, an enlargement of the 1910 Workers Dwellings Act, included new concepts such as the provision of public parks, recreation grounds and reserves, libraries, halls and other buildings in housing schemes for public servants. However, the newly formed Housing Board largely ignored these requirements when constructing the new housing areas and the scheme was crippled by a combination of the rising material costs, a shortage of joinery in New Zealand and a lack of government commitment.¹²

The 1920s saw more interest in housing development take shape as both state lending and the release of suburban Crown land for sale in the 1920s caused a rise of prospective housing development on the outskirts of the main towns.¹³ This was the start of a brief period of housing development, with an emphasis on rapid subdivision and expansion. Many people at the time found the prospect of living in these new areas inviting, as they offered a chance to move out of the built-up town areas and into an environment with more space and better living. However the schemes had major pitfalls. Many people who hoped to become new suburban dwellers found themselves signed up for a scheme that largely relied on state funds.¹⁴ Government retrenchment and the failure of land development and building firms during the late 1920s caught out many people wanting to buy new houses. In May 1925, it was reported that people were living in tents on the designated sections of their new

¹² Ferguson, p. 87.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 90.

houses on the Tramways Estate in Point Chevalier, Auckland, as they lacked the money to build and were unable to sell their sections.¹⁵

Many local authorities were unenthusiastic ^{about} towards the housing schemes. In 1924, the Dunedin City Council built seven cottages, for which there were 100 applicants.¹⁶ The most significant housing venture of the 1920s, a plan for workers dwellings in Orakei devised by the Housing Department and the Auckland City Council, became one of the region's 'most expensive and exclusive residential areas.'¹⁷ As a result of these failed schemes, most of the country's population found themselves living in rented dwellings instead of living in houses of their own.¹⁸

The housing situation in New Zealand encountered more problems during the 1930s. The Depression of the early 1930s caused considerable unemployment of people in the building industry. For example, The Auckland Carpenters Union had 1000 members signed to their books, but could only find half of them and only sixty were 'engaged fully to the trade.'¹⁹ From 1930 not only did the Coalition Government impose a policy of deliberately lending less money for housing through the State Advances Corporation, but many home owners found themselves incapable of keeping up mortgage repayments as economic conditions worsened at the onset of the Depression. Many of them were forced to sell their homes at a greatly reduced price or simply moved out and returned them to the State Advances Corporation.²⁰

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁶ Erik Olssen, 'Towards a New Society' in *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, eds. W.H. Oliver and B.R. Williams, Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 276.

¹⁷ Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', p. 276.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 276

¹⁹ Erik Olssen, 'Depression and War' in *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, ed. Keith Sinclair, Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 216.

²⁰ Pilkington, p. 3.

Concern over the poor condition of inner city housing rose again. In 1934 an article in *Truth* reported that 7,000 families in the central Wellington Area lived in 'rotten, decrepit, stinking, disease-pregnant, damp, and vermin-infested houses', while the City Engineer of Auckland described thirty-five per cent of all inner-city housing as being totally unsatisfactory.²¹

In November 1935, the country went to the election polls. The Labour Government, led by Michael Joseph Savage, replaced the unpopular Coalition Government, which had failed to adequately solve the problems that the Depression had brought down upon the population of New Zealand. The new Government quickly moved to implement policies to improve the well-being of the Dominion's population, including a housing scheme that in the words of the Minister of Finance, Walter Nash, would provide every New Zealander with 'a house fit for a Cabinet Minister.'²²

In September 1936, the Ministry of Housing and the Housing Department came into existence with the intention of setting up the construction of new state houses under the revived Housing Act of 1919. At the head of the new department was the Parliamentary Under Secretary for Housing and the Director of Housing Construction, John A. Lee. The Department rapidly expanded to include a staff of Town Planners, Architects, Draughtsmen, Quantity Surveyors and 'Stores.'²³ The State Advances Corporation continued to administer the scheme's financial aspects and the letting of completed houses.

²¹ Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', p. 276.

²² Olssen, 'Depression and War', p. 221.

²³ J. Wells, *A History of State Housing Construction in New Zealand*, MA Thesis, University of Auckland, 1944, p. 38.

Labour was convinced that by funding a housing scheme, they would be able to fulfil the need for 6,000 new homes per year, while simultaneously relieving the country's unemployment.²⁴ By the time Labour had come to power, twelve per cent of the workforce was unemployed, a large number of which were workers from building or associated trades, or general labourers.²⁵ The Government also aimed to use materials produced and manufactured in New Zealand in the construction of the housing areas.

John A. Lee was chiefly responsible for the successful launching of the new Government Housing Programme. The building standards of the new state houses were based largely around his ideals of the types of homes that were to be constructed. Lee believed that the new houses should not be constructed like workers barracks, but should instead be sound new houses built up to the standard of, and preferably better than, the houses lived in by average citizens.²⁶ Every house was to have a separate plot of ground and was to be individual in design as much as possible, although standardization would run through the whole scheme regarding construction issues such as the height of the windows. The plans were designed to position the living room in the sunny side of the houses, while the kitchens were set up so a woman could run her home without having to move too much. No two houses in the same area were to be the same in appearance, while a high standard of quality construction would be maintained.²⁷ The Labour Government wanted the term

²⁴ Pilkington, p. 3.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁷ Wells, p. 39.

‘Worker’s Home’ to mean a house built to a new high standard, rather than a house built to an average standard.²⁸

Labour also claimed that it was building for the future; where people would be placed in a position to pay decent rentals for decent houses.²⁹ The old capitalist system of the oldest and poorest houses for people with the lowest incomes could not be changed overnight, but it would be changed. Houses were to be provided, not according to the purses of the people, but according to their needs.³⁰

The first of these State funded housing areas were built early in 1937 in the Hutt Valley, at Miramar, Wellington and at Orakei, Auckland. As early as 1936, the State Advances Corporation had been planning to establish a state housing area in Palmerston North, where it was seeking at least three hundred sections in a block there.³¹ Eventually a large education site covering almost seventy acres in the West End of the city was chosen as the site for the new housing scheme.³²

The site for the new Government housing venture would become known as the Savage Crescent State Housing Precinct. By the end of 1937, construction of the precinct was under way. Although nowhere near as big as other state housing projects like those in Wellington and Auckland, the Savage Crescent precinct would become significant in the history of New Zealand housing, and New Zealand History as a whole. Between 1938 and 1944 a total of 245 houses were built in this subdivision.³³

²⁸ Wells, p. 40.

²⁹ *Manawatu Evening Standard*, August 6, 1937, p. 2.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 2.

³¹ Pilkington, p. 4.

³² *Manawatu Daily Times*, November 27, 1936, p. 6.

³³ Pilkington, p. 4.

Savage Crescent was an example of comprehensive site planning with symmetrical street patterns and provision for shops and a central reserve.³⁴ These features were intended to be typical of an ideal State Housing suburb. Each State housing precinct was to have its own shopping centres, reserve land and community hall. It would also have to be close to schools and churches and have good access to public transport. The houses were built according to the 'solar principle of planning', in which all living rooms and bedrooms were to be given a northerly aspect, whether or not they faced the street, which was a significant housing innovation for that period.³⁵

The design of Savage Crescent was influenced by Sir Ebenezer Howard's 'Garden City' philosophy. The Government sustained the idea that mean streets made mean men, and pursued the ideal of a nuclear family living happily in suburbia.³⁶ The 'garden suburb' within workers housing areas was seen as a way of meeting this ideal. In Savage Crescent, the layout of the area was designed to contribute to the 'garden suburb' atmosphere with an emphasis on front gardens, good walkways and the suburb being organised so that it would not become a route for major traffic.³⁷ The individuality of house designs in the precinct was maintained.

The Savage Crescent Precinct was a good example of how the designs of housing schemes for working-class people in New Zealand almost changed overnight. Although State houses are instantly recognisable in New Zealand streetscape, in Palmerston North it is worth looking at the houses that were built before Savage

³⁴ Royce A. Hunt, *Takaro: Demographic and Social Characteristics of a State Housing Suburb*, MA thesis, Massey University, 1970, p. 10.

³⁵ Pilkington, p. 5.

³⁶ Cathrin Shaer, 'Quality Street', *Wallpaper*, 2002, p. 7.

³⁷ Pilkington, p. 7.

Crescent, which were not built to the same high standard of planning and construction as those in later suburbs such as Savage Crescent.³⁸ Once completed, the houses were generally well received by their tenants, many of whom would enjoy the community lifestyle and the 'garden suburb' atmosphere the precinct provided. Many of those people would live in the precinct for the rest of their lives.³⁹ By the end of March 1938, Savage Crescent was part of a large-scale State housing scheme, in which preliminary surveys of 1,985 acres had already been made for State housing areas throughout the Dominion.⁴⁰

When World War Two broke out, the Government's primary concern of supplying good housing to New Zealanders made way for the need to defend the Dominion from foreign invasion and join the allied war effort. Even then the Government considered housing construction to be second only in importance to the war effort.⁴¹

By 1944, an effective tenancy application system for people wanting to move into the new houses had been established. The selection of tenants was made through committees posted at the offices of the Housing Construction branches after the applicants had been graded according to the sizes of their families, degrees of urgency and the times that the applications had been lodged.⁴² By then, there was no difficulty in letting all the completed houses, and the high number of applications for houses

³⁸ *ibid* , p. 8.

³⁹ Pilkington, p. 6.

⁴⁰ 'Survey Operations – Report of Surveyor General on, for year ended 31st March, 1938 - Housing', *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives*, Vol. II, 1938, C.-1A, pp. 2-4.

⁴¹ 'State Advances Corporation of New Zealand – Annual Report and Accounts for Year Ended 31st March 1942 Part II – Housing Account', *AJHR*, 1942, B.-13, p.4.

⁴² 'State Advances Corporation of New Zealand – Annual Report and Accounts for Year Ended 31st March 1944 Part II – Housing Account', *AJHR*, Vol. I, 1944, B.-13, p.5.

caused concerns that there would be difficulty in supplying houses to even the most urgent cases.⁴³

The Savage Crescent State Housing Precinct in Palmerston North is an example of the First Labour Government's housing policies. The Labour Government's State housing schemes of the 1930s can be seen as a response to a desperate need for housing schemes of better standards than those of earlier governments. Attempts by governments of New Zealand during the early years of the twentieth century to produce housing schemes that would benefit people unable to afford their own homes and decrease slum areas in the cities were either half-hearted or misguided, and it was not until the Labour Party was voted into power in 1935 that any serious attempt was made to launch a large-scale housing scheme that would provide good-quality homes for the New Zealand masses. The Savage Crescent precinct is an example of the housing standard that Labour aimed for. It also gives a valuable insight into Labour's attitudes towards government housing in the 1930s, and how people responded to Labour's housing schemes. Therefore Savage Crescent is an important part of the history of New Zealand housing, and New Zealand history as a whole.

⁴³ *AJHR*, Vol. I, 1944, B.-13, p. 5.

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